

A Female Fate in “Quare Name For A Boy”, by Claire Keegan

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Abstract: *Questions regarding the female gender – especially those that entail women’s role in society – are better understood once analyzed within a historical background. In the Irish patriarchal perspective, women were idealized as wife and mothers; motherhood was imposed as a social norm, and the domestic realm was sanctified as the basis of the family unit. This institutionalized version of womanhood, questioned initially by the 1970s feminist movements, is confronted by the transformations of Ireland after the Celtic Tiger Period, when the work environment was redesigned with the inclusion of women as workforce. From the 1980s onward, Irish women demanded the revision of issues such as marriage, motherhood, abortion, sexual freedom and equal pay. In “Quare Name for a Boy”, published in *Antarctica* (1999), Claire Keegan presents the predicament of a woman who gets pregnant after a casual fling, returning home to reassess her place and fate, in comparison to those of her female relatives. This reading of Keegan’s story, in the light of studies by Pauline Jackson, Jacqueline Rose, and Pilar Argáiz on the social and cultural transformations that Ireland has undergone, intends to demonstrate how women are breaking the mold regarding female fate by opting for a more independent role in society.*

Keywords: *Women’s identity; Short story; Irish Literature; Women’s writing.*

Resumo: *Questões relacionadas ao gênero feminino, em especial aquelas relacionadas ao papel da mulher na sociedade, são mais bem compreendidas quando analisadas em um contexto histórico. Na perspectiva irlandesa patriarcal, em que as mulheres eram idealizadas como esposa e mãe, a maternidade era imposta como um padrão social, e o espaço doméstico passou a ser santificado e considerado como base do núcleo familiar. Essa versão institucionalizada da feminilidade, questionada por movimentos feministas da década de 1970, é confrontada pelas transformações da Irlanda após o período do Tigre Celta e pela reformulação do ambiente de trabalho com a inclusão de mulheres. A partir da década de 1980, as irlandesas passaram a exigir a revisão de questões como casamento, maternidade, aborto, liberdade sexual e equiparação salarial. Em “Quare Name for a Boy” publicado em *Antarctica* (1999), Claire Keegan apresenta a história de uma mulher que engravida após um caso passageiro e, ao voltar para casa, reavalia sua condição e seu destino, em comparação ao de seus pais. À luz de estudos de Pauline Jackson, Jacqueline Rose e Pilar Argáiz acerca das transformações sociais e culturais na Irlanda, o conto de Keegan demonstra que as mulheres estão quebrando paradigmas em relação ao destino que lhes era reservado ao optar por um papel mais independente na sociedade.*

Palavras-chave: *Identidade Feminina; Conto; Literatura Irlandesa; Escrita Feminina.*

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The role of a woman in society has been historically consolidated in the figure of the loving daughter, who turns into a dutiful wife and mother, and is responsible for the management of the domestic space, which becomes her only domain in a patriarchal society. Such a statement can be perceived as dated and exclusionary, especially when juxtaposed to the feminist movements which struggled to deconstruct such expectations that have determined the place of women in society. In other words, from the its inception, the feminist movements affirmed that mere physical ability to reproduce could not result in an imposition of such a fate; and motherhood, as a choice, should not imprison a woman into marriage.

The freedom of choice for which the feminist movements have been fighting since the 1970s finds new demands in an ever changing world where social, political and economic impositions demand a rewriting of those historical roles – especially the ones inflicted on a woman who now has to fill in a gap in the workforce. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, a great deal of issues related to women emerged as a result of this change in society, inciting drastic changes in the laws of the country, which resulted in the resignification of womanhood. In “Quare Name for a Boy”, published in *Antarctica* (1999), Claire Keegan presents a somewhat up to date view of a character dealing with her life decisions, while pondering on her predicaments and options regarding motherhood, marriage and work in contrast with those of her female relatives who, in some way, seemed to conform to a more traditional perspective of a woman’s role in the society. The analysis of this short story intends to illustrate how the recent achievements of feminist movements, in terms of politics and social agenda, have enabled women to choose their own fate regarding relationships, motherhood and career.

The plot of “Quare Name for a Boy” revolves around a woman, the first-person narrator of the short story, who presents herself as a writer moving back to Ireland to deal with the life changing consequences of a casual Christmas fling. The entire narrative is presented through her point of view and reveals her reaction towards her female relatives’ behavior and fate. The short story does not disclose but one name, Daphne, the one that relates to the title of the narrative for being the likely choice of the name for the unborn child of the main character. This woman, her relatives and the male character to whom she comes back to talk, remain a mystery throughout the short story, due to the fact that only vague references are made, such as the observation about the main character’s age:

Writing is a queer occupation, especially at my age. They calculate my age, trying to remember what happened around the time I was born, who died. They’re not too sure, but I no spring chicken anymore. I should be doing something else by now, latching myself onto some unmarried man with a steady wage and a decent car. (Keegan 102)

The female counterparts, who have served as inspiration for some of the characters in the narrator’s writings, offer a perspective of life according to the expectations of a patriarchal society, a life which the main character abhors. As far as the protagonist is concerned, her relatives have abdicated from of any chance of personal happiness and fulfillment, as described in the first lines of Keegan’s story: “They are flat-bellied, temperamental women who’ve given up and call it happiness. We come from women who comfort men, men who never say no.” (101) This awareness of her fellow relatives’ fate acts as a warning sign for the main character

of “Quare Name for a Boy”; it is a cautionary tale of the future that she has been trying to avoid, until she is met with extraordinary circumstances.

The distance between these women’s seemingly ordinary lives and that of the narrator results in a feeling of oddness, which is reflected in the following excerpts: “I am like an American cousin” (Keegan 102) and “They rummage through my things, trying to find out who I am.” (103) These are women who seem to have embraced their fate as wives and mothers and give the impression of being pleased to fulfill their duties as housewives, yet they have a hard time picturing a different path, as can be perceived when the main character affirms that she is going to be a writer when her relatives ask her about her plans. As previously quoted, at her age she should be busy finding herself a husband, as far as these women are concerned. As Pauline Jackson affirms by quoting D. Kergoat (1982): “. . . that when women workers do become sociologically visible, it is usually as asexual beings, their productive and reproductive roles having been artificially separated.” (289). This expectation of a woman’s role in society results from conventionally idealizing women as mothers and wives, which should not be applicable if a woman decides otherwise and chooses to work outside the home.

By assuming this somewhat unconventional path of becoming a writer, when seen through the point of view of a traditional patriarchal society, she disrupts the traditional social fabric, for once she opts out by following a career instead of settling down and starting a family, she renounces this basic unit of society, which according to Jackson, “is written into the Constitution of Ireland (1937) as a separate Article; as a fact with which most people might agree.” (291). Historically, the only occupation suitable for a woman was taking care of children, an occupation that is regarded as dispossessed of value, once it is part of the female natural vocation.

In the case of the central character in “Quare Name for a Boy”, the unexpected pregnancy of the protagonist represents a disruption in the path she had been following up to that point. This woman, right from the outset, shows an appreciation for the freedom that she enjoyed up to that point:

I have come home to tell you. I have walked back into my past, my clothes too small for me, a story from a women’s magazine.

I’ve come back before, bought ferry crossings for engagement parties, my nephew’s christening, and that Christmas when I met you . . . I was your Christmas fling, a thing to break the boredom of the holidays, and you were mine. But now these suitcases have the weight of anchors on this floor I learned to walk on. It may be I’m back for good, but nothing is certain. (Keegan 101)

The excitement of the promise of a somewhat carefree life is suddenly compromised by an event that not only sentences the main character to a number of life changing choices, such as whether or not to move back to Ireland, or whether or not to keep the child, but also alludes to issues on the Irish identity, as Keegan (1999) describes:

“You’re looking well, whatever you’re doing with yourself across the water,” you say with something that sounds like disapproval. Irish girls should dislike England, they should stay on their own turf and raise their sons up right, stuff the chicken, snip the parsley, tolerate the blare of the Sunday game. (104)

The reaction against these social expectations is also a means of confronting the former colonizer, which is in consonance with notion of identity devised by Stuart Hall in “National cultures as imagined communities” (2005: my translation). According to Hall, people are not only legal citizens of a nation, but they are subscribed in an idea of the nation as represented in the national culture (30). As a result of the historical dispute between Ireland and the United Kingdom, the Irish identity became, in a certain way, socially defined by the tendency of enhancing the traces which distinguished its people from that of its oppressor. Logically, this struggle to be seen as an independent nation translated itself in passages such as the one previously quoted from Keegan, on the expectation of Irish girls about England.

Up to that point, the main character felt as if she were allowed to live a carefree life, to risk a career in writing, to live in England and to return to Ireland only on special occasions, as if young adults had something that should be expelled from their systems before settling down back into the motherland, ready to fulfil their destinies and obligations in the social scale. Upon returning to Ireland, her heavy luggage had “the weight of anchors” (95), the weight of the unexpected turn of events prompted by a pregnancy that resulted from a casual fling. If the event itself did not determine the fate of the main character, it was enough to induce some meditation on the matter after an encounter with female relatives whose idea of life was suited only for the characters in the stories she wrote. Her pregnancy was enough to replace the excitement of a seemingly carefree life, which was up to that point full of choices, for one of frightful uncertainty. Now, the protagonist must face not only the biological, but also the social and cultural implications of becoming a mother.

In “Matrophobia or Matrocompliance? Motherhood as ‘Experience and Institution’ in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan” (2009), Pilar Villar Argáiz considers Adrienne Rich’s main thoughts on motherhood seemed as a social function:

Drawing on history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, literature and personal materials . . . Rich explains how patriarchy has tended to idealise women as mothers, transforming motherhood into a social, not merely physical, function. She distinguishes between two meanings of motherhood: biological motherhood or “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children”, and motherhood as an “institution, which aims at ensuring that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.” (127)

In this sense, by reinforcing this social notion of motherhood, a woman when pregnant would be more than ever subdued to the control of a man and of the nation. There is no doubt that the current scenario for women has been changing since the beginning of the feminist movements. In *Out of Wedlock: Extra-Marital and Unmarried Pregnancies as Reflected in Selected Short Fiction by Contemporary Irish Women Writers*, Eva Marchhart refers to the “increasing publicity of Irish women writers and artists and Women’s Studies at universities developed” and “the election of Mary Robinson as the first female president in 1990” (13) as marks of the progress of feminist counter-culture, despite the political and economic backlashes from the 1980s to the 1990s.

In recent years – especially the ones of the period in which Ireland joined the European Union, and more recently after the economic boom when the country became known as the *Celtic Tiger* – the country underwent several changes and achievements on women’s issues, such as the 1995 referendum, which removed the constitutional ban on divorce; the rise in employment for women, reaching a rate of more than 60% by 2007, according to the

European Commission in *The EU and Irish women* (2019); the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015; the repeal of the 8th amendment in 2018, which granted women the right to choice as regards abortion, among others. These accomplishments, however, were met with resistance in a society used to associate women with the household, which, in fact, was present in the very Constitution of Ireland, as Argáiz remarks:

Articles 41 and 45 of the 1937 Constitution immediately associated Irish women with motherhood and domesticity. Women were expected to carry their lives of service and self-sacrifice in the sanctified realm of the domestic sphere: their model to follow was the Virgin Mary, an ideal of virtue, abnegation and submissive suffering. The lives of women were further limited through legislation: laws prohibiting contraception and divorce were introduced, and later, a constitutional amendment was passed, banning the practice of abortion. (128)

Despite the fact that motherhood is considered a natural act by many women, it can rather turn into a struggle when society imposes models such as that of the Virgin Mary, especially because they entail an ideal that involves the submission of women. For instance, when motherhood takes place out of wedlock, the social response can be one of intolerance, which is depicted, in Keegan's short story, through the memory of the protagonist:

I remember the story of a young woman someplace down west. They found her in a hut her father'd built, a one-roomed cabin without a chimney. In a wood, he'd kept her and let her die sooner than let a neighbor know she was having a child. I can still see the photos: a stretcher with a body bag, another of her smiling in a school group, her head and shoulders circled. (104)

This reminiscence of the main character shows that motherhood can be turned into shame, a sin that is considered worse than the vile act of a father who condemns his daughter to death rather than suffer the possible scrutiny from his neighbors. At the same time, as L. I. Gjurgjan recalls in *The (Im)possibility of Women's Bildungsroman*, the act of motherhood should include possibility of choice, a choice that has not been given to this girl that ended up in a body bag (119).

All the subtle references to women's life conditions and to the social impositions on motherhood, by means of her relatives' lives, and which the main character appalls, are swiftly resolved once she decides her fate while disclosing the news to the child's father:

"Well, the damage is done now," you say.

...

"What do you think of the name Daphne?"

And there it is, my decision named. No boat trip, no roll of twenty-pound notes, no bleached white waiting room with dog-eared women's magazines at the clinic.

You peer into your glass.

"It's a quare name for a boy", you say. (Keegan 107-108).

The protagonist has not only decided to keep the baby, but she suggests, by way of the name choice, the possibility of having a girl. The chosen name is inspired by the author of *Jamaica Inn*, Daphne Du Maurier. This choice that can be seen as an affirmation of the main

character's identity since she has dubbed herself as a writer. Her decision also implies a subversion by means of the feminine, which is highlighted by the reaction to the proposed name by the recently aware father's expectation that the child would be a boy to preserve the historical tradition of the male heir to ease the "damage" caused by an unwanted pregnancy. By deciding to keep this unplanned child, the main character fulfils a rather subversive identity, as Jacqueline Rose suggests in *Mother: an essay on love and cruelty* (2018):

Mothers, we might say, are the original subversives, never – as feminism long insisted – what they seem, or are meant to be. ... I have never met a single mother (myself included) who is not far more complex, critical, at odds with the set of clichés she is meant effortlessly to embody, than she is being encouraged – or rather instructed – to think. (ch. 1)

In Keegan's short story, the protagonist's determination to have the baby is not inspired by the desire of fulfilling her destiny as a woman: "Whatever you say, I'll manage . . . And I won't comfort you. I will not be the woman who shelters her man same as he's a boy. That part of my people ends with me." (Keegan 107) Rather, it is as an affirmation of a woman's power in a patriarchal society, a conscious decision of breaking a cycle of subservience and guilt, for, as Rose (2018) points out in the opening chapter, motherhood "is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which become the task – unrealizable, of course – of mothers to repair." (ch. Opening).

In conclusion, the fate of the main character in "Quare Name for a Boy" is determined by pride, "Because pride is something I know about." (Keegan 108), she says. In the final lines of the short story, Keegan reveals the importance of the feeling of pride and of freedom of choice that women should be intitled to, even if it were to opt for something as natural for a woman as pregnancy. The decision of becoming a mother in the story is accompanied by the conscious refusal of the tradition of women caretakers from her family, of the possible constraints of a casual fling turning into forced relationship due to an unplanned pregnancy, and ultimately by the affirmation of her sense of self, of the value of a woman and her right to choose the path that she finds best.

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